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## **SPECIAL ISSUE 'AUTHENTICATING CELEBRITY'**

### **'We are not calling her Italian': narratives and images of ethnic incorporation in Isa Miranda's American persona**

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#### **Abstract**

This article discusses the impact of Hollywood standards of homogenisation on Isa Miranda's cosmopolitan appeal during her work for Paramount. The article suggests that Miranda's American image was constructed in an attempt to establish her as a Marlene Dietrich type in order to defuse the potential threat represented by her ethnic Otherness; meanwhile, the Italian actress was framed within film narratives that played out (albeit indirectly) an idealised conception of successful American assimilation of European immigrants. In the process, Miranda was visually constructed through images that effectively 'whitened' her,

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and her Italianness was thus displaced onto an ideal of Northern European whiteness that bespoke a desire to reassert whiteness as the norm in 1930s America.

**Keywords:** ethnic film stars; whiteness; ethnicity; Italianness; homogenisation

### **Author bio**

Antonella Palmieri is senior lecturer in Film, TV and Media at the University of Lincoln. Her research is concerned with the politics of gender, sexual and ethnic representations in Hollywood cinema and American and British Television. She has contributed to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Films* (Routledge 2014) and to *Stars in World Cinema: Screen Icons and Star Systems across Cultures* (I.B. Tauris 2015). Recently, she published 'Sophia Loren and the healing power of female Italian ethnicity in *Grumpier Old Men*', in L. Bolten et al., eds. *Lasting Stars: Images that Fade and Personas that Endure* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). Her current project focuses on the construction of Virna Lisi's star image, anti-feminist narratives and the emergent women's liberation movement for gender equality in mid-1960s American society.

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## **‘We are not calling her Italian’: narratives and images of ethnic incorporation in Isa Miranda’s American persona**

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As Raymond Durgnat has observed, ‘the social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars’ (1967, p. 138). More specifically, Ginette Vincendeau has pointed out that ‘the star’s “myth” helps reconcile contradictions that exist in the social roles expected of men and women at key historical moments, and “naturalises”, thereby validating, historical constructions’ (2000, p. 35). Vincendeau has also argued that whereas American stars, given the global nature of the Hollywood system of production and distribution, tend to acquire an international dimension because of the worldwide market to which they are exposed, European-born stars can be regarded as ‘more national’, because they are exposed to a much smaller market. She adds that outside France, for instance, French stars of the calibre of Catherine Deneuve, Gerard Depardieu and Juliette Binoche carry the ‘burden’ of national identity and come to be defined by their Frenchness (2000, p. 31).

By the same token, and by elaborating on Vincendeau’s argument, it could be suggested that those Italian film stars who happen to enjoy international popularity are perceived as embodying the nation and are defined by their national identity. When abroad, actors, whether they are stars or not, also function as ‘ambassadors’ for their country, and thus also embody a fantasised, constructed ethnicity which can be said to result from the

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interaction of their 'real' ethnicity (of the actor/actress as it would appear on their census form), their 'perceived' ethnicity (of the star embodied in that actor/actress – the off-screen star persona) and their ethnicity 'on screen' (that is, the role the star plays on the screen – the ethnic content of the role itself) (Jarvie 2004, pp. 168-169). Meanwhile, Diane Negra contends that ethnic celebrities can serve a number of different purposes, including the embodiment of successful assimilation into whiteness; the conveyance of anxiety about American national homogeneity, when ethnic identity comes to be perceived as a threat of national erasure; and the expression of the attractiveness of a particular ethnicity in American culture, according to historical shifts taking place with respect to the rank of that ethnic group in a hierarchy of valued ethnicities and assimilating groups (2001, p. 18). In this light, it is difficult to disagree with Richard Dyer that, 'no matter where one chooses to put the emphasis in terms of the stars' place in the production/consumption dialectic of the cinema, that place can still only be fully understood ideologically' (1998, p. 34).

With these initial observations in mind, this article aims to show that the popular cultural trope of Italian femininity, as embodied by the Italian film star Isa Miranda (1909-1982), generated powerful images within American culture of the late 1930s, and that these images can be successfully deployed 'in shaping and sustaining cultural debates about gender roles and valued ethnicities' (Negra, 2001, p. 24). The article discusses the impact of Hollywood standards of homogenisation on Miranda's cosmopolitan appeal during her work for Paramount. I propose that Miranda's American image was constructed in an attempt to establish her as a Marlene Dietrich type in order to defuse the potential threat represented by her ethnic Otherness; meanwhile, the Italian actress was framed within film narratives that

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played out (albeit indirectly) an idealised conception of successful American assimilation of European immigrants. In the process, Miranda was visually constructed through images that effectively ‘whitened’ her, and her Italianness was thus displaced onto an ideal of Northern European whiteness that bespoke a desire to reassert whiteness as the norm in 1930s America.

One of the most noted Italian stars of the 1930s and 1940s, Miranda achieved international popularity in the mid-1930s after playing the title role in *La Signora di Tutti* (1934), a role she landed by winning a widely publicised national contest for the film’s leading lady. She made two Hollywood films, *Hotel Imperial* (1939) and the South Africa-set *Adventure in Diamonds* (1940). While Miranda’s Hollywood career was short, her case is instructive in a number of ways. Not only was Miranda the first Italian star to be invited to work in Hollywood, but her Italian persona was deliberately constructed as a reply to American film stars. At a time when there was no studio system in Italy, nor any systematic method of selecting, grooming and launching stars, Miranda’s construction as a glamorous film star in Fascist Italy was modelled on the Hollywood studio process, with its emphasis on marketing and publicity. Significant in this respect are the commercial and publicity strategies behind the production of Miranda’s Italian star vehicle *La Signora di Tutti* – an ambitious project on the part of the film’s production company, Novella-Film, and its founder, media tycoon Angelo Rizzoli, who intended the film to prove the potential for Italian films to achieve international success and challenge Hollywood productions.

As Stephen Gundle (2002) observes, Miranda became ‘the symbol of the possibility of the existence of a fully-fledged Italian star figure. She enjoyed much popularity and was

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invested with hopes that reached their highest point when she was offered a contract by Paramount and invited to Hollywood in 1937’ (p. 325). Her Italian persona developed at a time when Mussolini’s regime attempted to compete with the American film industry and limit the cultural impact of Hollywood’s products (including film stars) on Italian society. To this end, Mussolini’s Italy sought to create a modern and competitive national film industry and star system of its own. Deliberately constructed as an exportable Italian product of international quality and appeal, able to combine what Rizzoli regarded as ‘the sexual provocation of Marlene Dietrich and the spiritual depth of Greta Garbo’ (Mosconi 2003, p. 54), Miranda was a truly transnational film star who effectively bridged the ‘European and American divide’ (Smith 2002, p. 9) even before she crossed the Atlantic Ocean to reach the American shore.

If it could be argued that to some extent Miranda’s Italian persona had already been ‘Americanised’ well before she went to work in Hollywood to become part of the Paramount roster, her American persona lends itself to an exploration the ‘border spaces of whiteness’ (Negra 2002, p. 176) within which Italian-born film stars were situated in American culture. In particular, Miranda beautifully exemplifies how cultural fantasies about Italian-American assimilation, internal hierarchies of whiteness and issues around gender and ethnicity informed popular fantasies of Italian femininity in 1930s America. Miranda never played an Italian/Italian-American character, nor was her Italianness ever significantly mobilised in tailoring her persona for American cultural consumption. While the film narratives in which she was situated were located outside US national borders, on screen Miranda played a Polish character (*Hotel Imperial*) and a European of unknown nationality (*Adventure in Diamonds*).

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In cultural discourses around her off-screen persona she was rarely referred to as Italian. Occasionally she would be called 'Milanese', from her home town Milan (although it would not be openly specified that Milan was an Italian city), but mostly she would be defined as European, or Continental. Such vagueness about her ethnic origins in the studio discourse, publicity material and critical commentary circulating around her in American culture is indeed indicative of a need to familiarise and defuse the threatening ethnic Other she potentially represented in American society of the time. During this era, the 'melting pot' ideology that widely circulated banked on the suppression of ethnic difference (Gleason 1964, pp. 20-46). As Roger Daniels maintains, 'immigrants and their children' were usually urged, even by those welcoming them, to 'shed all or almost all of their original cultures' (2007, p. 220), especially if they were of Southern or Eastern European descent. Hence, Miranda's American persona offers an opportunity to explore American values and prejudices of the time with regard to anxieties about (female) Italianness in particular.

In this light, I argue that Miranda's publicity image, both on screen and off screen, worked, whether consciously or not, to 'whiten' her. In glamour portraits that were circulated by the Paramount publicity department at the time, as well as still images from her two films, Miranda was often costumed in white and bathed in light as a strategy to visually neutralise her potentially problematic ethnic status. I draw on Dyer's (1997) argument about the skilful use of light by the aesthetic technology of the photographic media to construct ideal(ised) images of white femininity within heterosexuality. Dyer suggests that in films and photographs ideal(ised) white women glow, and that that glow is also given to white women by blonde hair and white clothing (1997, pp. 122-124). In this respect, Miranda easily 'lent'

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herself to the ‘construction’ of an ideal(ised) visual category of whiteness because, as a woman who was blonde, tall, slender and had a pale complexion, she did not look ‘Italian’: she was not a curvaceous Mediterranean beauty, but rather a sophisticated and glamorous Northern European Venus. In this context I will draw out the construction of Miranda in terms of Northern Europe via an association with the European stars Dietrich, in particular, and Greta Garbo, both of whom had previously become Hollywood household names.

In discussing the ways in which the Hollywood studio system’s standards impacted on Miranda as she joined Paramount, I take as a starting point Christian Viviani’s observation that, ‘roughly between 1925 and 1945, Hollywood tried out several other foreign actresses’ that were ‘modelled either on Garbo [...] or on Dietrich. Or they went for a skilful mix of the two’ (2006, p. 98). Indeed, a press release circulated at the time of Miranda’s arrival in Hollywood reads, ‘Mussolini’s favourite movie star stepped off the Santa Fe Chief yesterday to enter world competition with the Dietrichs and the Garbos of Hollywood. She is Isa Miranda, tall [...] and blond, termed by foreign critics the most glamorous woman in Europe’.<sup>1</sup> As Peter Lehman and William Luhr (2008) suggest, specific associations were central to Dietrich’s star image in Hollywood. While the films she featured in were exotic-looking, foreign-set features revolving around decadent people who experience great passion, cruelty and pain, her characters were jaded Continental women with a past. They observe that Dietrich ‘dominated’ the screen with a highly erotic presence skilfully enhanced by the ways she was photographed, especially in the films she made under Von Stenberg’s direction. In these films Dietrich was lit in diffused light through obscuring smoke and shadows, rather than in full lighting, as was customary for actresses of the time. The manner in which she was



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photographed dramatically contributed to the creation of an appealing but mysterious and often contradictory presence (Lehman and Luhr 2008, pp. 162-168).

Taking this into account, I argue that Miranda was groomed by Paramount to be visually associated with Dietrich’s Northern-Euro glamour. In Hollywood glamour portraits of the time Miranda is often visually portrayed ‘à la Dietrich’, she looks slim and sophisticated, with blonde curls, a sculpted forehead, high cheekbones and a statuesque allure <Figure 1>. This was in line with Hollywood’s preference for Northern European stars. Hollywood studio heads of the time were, as Gary Gerstle claims, ‘creating images of America in which Nordic types loomed large and Jewish and other new immigrant types disappeared from view’ (2002, p. 170). Building on Gerstle’s argument, Rachel Kapelke-Dale observes that Dietrich’s own appearance ‘was distinctly Northern-European. At this time, the Nordic type still took precedence in star creation [...]. Certainly, the images cultivated on behalf of Dietrich supported this Nordic image’ (2016, p. 92). As Miranda’s American star image attempted to establish her as a Dietrich type, her Italianness was therefore sublimated into a desire in Hollywood for Northern European stars that in turn bespeaks a need to reassert white normativity. Paramount’s attempt to construct Miranda as a Dietrich type was made in terms of the narrative situations in her films as well. Both of Miranda’s American films, like most of Dietrich’s films, are set in exotic locales. In both of them, Miranda is, like Dietrich, a glamorous, mysterious foreigner with a past, whose nationality can be regarded as a ‘token gesture’ since her symbolic ethnic persona ‘is underlined by a multitude of details that “muddle” the real origin of the character’ (Viviani

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2006, p. 97) while carrying associations of decadence, exotic sexual daring, and exotic places and lifestyles.

### **Miranda in Hollywood**

*La Signora di Tutti* was intended to re-launch a declining Italian cinema by offering a product of European allure able to compete with Hollywood output on an international market. As part of this project, Miranda, at first a virtually unknown Milanese stenographer, was groomed for stardom by way of a meticulous campaign inspired by the Hollywood studio system. Miranda went on to star in many Italian and European productions, becoming a household name. Prior to her recruitment to Hollywood, Miranda made twelve films as a protagonist between 1934 and 1938. While the majority of her films were Italian productions, she also worked in Germany (*Du Bist Mein Glück*, 1936) and France (*Le Mensonge di Nina Petrovna*, 1938).

In 1937 Miranda was offered a term contract by Paramount Pictures and moved to Hollywood. In September 1939, the actress had said that it was her greatest wish to return and see her seriously ill mother, which she did, sailing back to her hometown Milan on the Italian liner Rex on 14 December 1939. She had added that after the visit she would return to Hollywood to make more pictures, if Hollywood wanted her to. However, during the journey Miranda received news that her passport had been withdrawn by the Italian authorities, who, according to the actress, had grown suspicious of her owing to alleged contact between her husband and manager (Alfredo Guarini) and the American Left (Mosconi 2003, p. 16).

Giuliana Muscio speculates that Miranda's losing her passport might also have been related

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to the fact that while filming *Du Bist Mein Glück* in Germany, Miranda had declined an invitation by Joseph Goebbels, the powerful Reich Minister of Propaganda, to a party in her honour. Meanwhile, Gundle observes that it was because of the deteriorating relationship between Italy and the US (which would enter World War II in June 1940 and December 1941 respectively) that Miranda returned home (2002, p. 325). It could also be suggested that an increasingly problematic relationship between Paramount and Miranda might have been one of the causes of the abrupt closure of the actress's Hollywood career.

Particularly significant in this respect, it could be said, is the '*Zaza* incident', as Paramount executives would call it, which took place in August 1938. While *Hotel Imperial* is traditionally regarded as Miranda's first American film, prior to Florey's film Miranda had been involved in the production of George Cukor's *Zaza* (1938), in which she was cast as the leading lady. However, after just a few days of shooting, Miranda was replaced by Claudette Colbert. Miranda recalls that a car accident she had, for which the insurance company would not pay the premium, led Paramount to suspend her from the film (Muscio 2004, p. 299), and Muscio observes that Paramount officially justified the substitution on health grounds (*ibid.*). However, another explanation can be found in a letter dated 6 January 1939, from A.M. Botsford, Advertising and Publicity Director for Paramount's Theatre Chain Division, to Paramount's 'theatre contacts'. The letter, which aims to introduce *Hotel Imperial* to the exhibitors, also makes reference to Miranda and her involvement in *Zaza*, attributing the difficulties the studio had with her entirely to diction. Botsford (1939) observes:

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[Miranda] is the only great Italian film star [...]. When she came here, she could hardly speak any English. She studied hard and learned enough English to make us think she could have played Zaza. If she could have played it in her native tongue, she would have been great in it, but her handicapped English put a restraint on her that made it difficult for her in this picture, to the extent that we took her cut and replaced her with Colbert. After that, she continued her English studies to the point where she became very good. She of course, still has a very definite accent but it is perfectly intelligible and easily understood.

Certainly Paramount was concerned about the possible repercussions of the incident, in Italy and in other parts of the world. In an undated letter to the Paramount executive Russell Holman, Botsford refers to the negative reactions ('queries and elevated eyebrows') the incident had prompted in the Italian papers (Botsford n.d.). And among the reasons he lists to make *Hotel Imperial* at a reasonable cost with Miranda is the fact that the casting of Miranda in this role would 'avoid any unpleasant repercussion foreign-wise from the Miranda-Zaza incident'.

Meanwhile, the actress apparently found it difficult to adjust to the Hollywood studio system and lifestyle. Paramount press releases circulating a few weeks after her arrival in the US in the autumn of 1937 clearly indicate Miranda's 'dislike' of social gatherings. Although Paramount maintained that, according to Guarini, Miranda never liked to go to parties in Europe, either, and that she wanted to concentrate on work while in Hollywood, a biography of the film star released by the Studio in March 1939 described her as a 'a creature of moods,

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[who] suffers from a fear of new places and new faces’ and who ‘declares she won’t go to night clubs’ (Anon 1937). Meanwhile, the press lamented that ‘in Hollywood she remained secluded. The studio commissary, the Hollywood night spots, never saw her’ (Hamilton 1940, p. 88). Reference to Miranda’s alleged ‘unhappiness’ in Hollywood became openly part of her American narrative at the time of the release in the US of Liliana Cavani’s *Il Portiere di Notte* (*The Night Porter*, 1974), where she played a character role. The publicity department of the American distributor of the film, AVCO Embassy Picture Corporation, released a biography of the actress in which it was stated that Miranda ‘was not happy in Hollywood [...] especially as she had to compete with jealous and powerful rivals [...]’. “A star has to be a beast without a heart” she remarked bitterly’ (Anon 1974).

If Miranda’s ‘social’ experience of Hollywood might not have been enjoyable, it seems that the actress was not happy about the roles Paramount gave her to play, either. As it emerged from an interview the actress gave in 1950, she felt she had been miscast in Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> Paramount wanted her to be a glamour girl, and although she did not like it, she had to comply.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the circumstances, Miranda would not return to Hollywood after Christmas 1939. She continued her career in Italy and Europe for decades, working in cinema, theatre and television until the late 1970s (Caldiron and Hochkofler 1978). She would work only occasionally in Hollywood, playing supporting roles.

#### **‘She has somewhat a look of Dietrich’<sup>4</sup>**

When Paramount brought Miranda to Hollywood in September 1937, the actress was asked, immediately upon her arrival, to set about improving her command of English – a task which

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Miranda, expected to be ready to perform in an English-speaking role in a few months, apparently attacked enthusiastically. As the publicity department at Paramount maintained in the autumn of that year, Miranda was immediately supplied with an English teacher. She would spend four to six hours a day studying, and ‘to accelerate matters, [she would] accompany American songs on the phonograph and would go shopping in 5, 10 and 15 cent stores’, learning the names of the objects ‘for which she did not know the English name’ (Anon 1937). The Paramount press release concluded that the system seemed to be working, since just six weeks after her arrival, Miranda could speak almost as well as Garbo. Of course, as already noted, Miranda was replaced by Colbert in *Zaza* precisely because her English was reputedly not good enough for such a dialogue-heavy role. Miranda’s ‘accented’ English in *Hotel Imperial* was noticed by film critics. For instance, *Stage* claimed that Miranda ‘is as intelligible as a tobacco auctioneer’ (Anon 1939a, p. 5), as well as describing her as being as exotic as an icicle and about as talented as a fur-coat model. The *Daily Variety*’s review of *Adventure in Diamonds* indirectly commented on Miranda’s linguistic skills, pointing out that the actress was sufficient in a role that took her accent into account (Anon 1940a, p. 8). Interestingly, an anonymous reviewer in the *Motion Picture Herald* mentioned Miranda’s command of English while emphasising her likeness to Dietrich, ‘Ah no, the star [of *Hotel Imperial*] is not Marlene Dietrich, although customers arriving after the credits have been flashed will think it is: the star is Isa Miranda, Paramount import, who looks and talks a great deal like Miss Dietrich used to and acts a good deal more convincingly’ (Anon 1939b). Miranda’s struggle to keep up with Hollywood’s expectations regarding her mastering the English language perfectly illustrates the problems she

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encountered as she faced Hollywood’s (and, by extension, America’s) ‘assimilationist’ culture, especially if one reads such a linguistic struggle alongside the actress’s reluctance to become part of the Hollywood social milieu.

If Miranda’s linguistic and social integration proved to be a challenge, the workings of Hollywood’s assimilationist machine are nevertheless clearly foregrounded in the deliberate attempt Paramount made to construct Miranda as a Dietrich type. Indeed, across the promotional commentaries which worked to establish Miranda’s American persona throughout her Hollywood stint, direct comparisons to Garbo and Dietrich, and to the latter in particular, were frequent. Moreover, these were not simply limited to comparisons of the linguistic abilities of Miranda and the better-established Garbo and Dietrich. In a fan magazine article from 1938 entitled ‘Beauty from Abroad’, Miranda appears alongside other foreign ‘newcomers’ in Hollywood, such as the Hungarian actress Ilona Massey and the French Danielle Darrieux. The aim of the article, which featured intense close-ups of the actresses, was to introduce the foreign stars to American moviegoers. At the time, Miranda had not yet made her first American film, and the unnamed author of the piece urges Paramount ‘to get busy and start it soon’. The piece goes on to claim that ‘[n]obody hoped to find a combination of Garbo and Dietrich, but now that the warm suns of Italy have produced that rarest flower, we yearn to see her’ (Anon 1938, p. 11). Likewise, in a review of *Hotel Imperial* which appeared in *Boxoffice*, a trade paper, on 22 April 1939, Miranda is referred to as ‘glamorous Miranda, who bears a strong resemblance to Marlene Dietrich’. Finally, in an article which appeared in *Photoplay* in April 1940, Sarah Hamilton observes that in both her American films Miranda’s resemblance to Dietrich in looks, accent and allure was noted.

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However, Hamilton plays down any intentionality in such a similarity, stressing that ‘it was no imitation. Miranda of Italy and Dietrich of Germany, by some strange coincidence, could pass for sisters’ (Hamilton 1940, p. 80). While Hamilton believed the resemblance to be coincidental, her argument could be disputed, since, as Brian Taves maintains in his work on *Hotel Imperial*’s director Robert Florey, Miranda was imported to Hollywood ‘with the hope she might become a new Dietrich’ (1987, p. 214).

Indeed, Paramount made a deliberate attempt, I argue, to construct Miranda as a Dietrich type. In 1936, for example, Miranda signed up for *Hotel Imperial*. Production had begun in early January, however, under the title *Invitation to Happiness* and was to star Dietrich in the leading role. *Invitation to Happiness* was dropped out of the production schedule in February 1936 and reappeared in March 1936 under the title *Hotel Imperial*. By that time Margaret Sullavan had replaced Dietrich. When Sullavan broke her arm, the project was eventually shut down. Production of a more modestly budgeted *Hotel Imperial* with Miranda, this time, as the female lead eventually resumed in late 1938. Furthermore, *Hotel Imperial* includes a musical number, which echoes Dietrich’s popular musical performances in films of the early 1930s such as *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930) and *Desire* (1936). Miranda entertains Russian troops by singing a song, wearing a low cut and tight-fitting black evening gown by Edith Head that strongly resembles Dietrich’s attire in *Desire*’s musical number ‘Awake in a Dream’.

Miranda’s second American film, *Adventure in Diamonds*, openly recalls Dietrich’s 1936 *Desire*. In both films, the female lead is a blonde jewel thief who is a glamorous accomplice within an international ring of thieves and is eventually ‘rescued’ from a life of



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perdition by a heterosexual love interest. Both films are set in exotic locations, *Desire* in Europe and *Adventure in Diamonds* in the cosmopolitan capital of South Africa, Cape Town. They also share strikingly similar opening sequences, which feature a dazzling array of sparkling, expensive jewels on display on glamorous women as the opening credits roll. Finally, Felice Falcon in *Adventure in Diamonds* is fashionably dressed in white, like Madeleine De Beaupre in *Desire*. Both Felice and Madeleine change costume very often and seem to have an extensive wardrobe where white dominates. While I regard the choice to dress Felice in fashionable and white outfits as ideologically fraught, I will expand on the implications of the link between Miranda and fashion, and on the whiteness of her costumes, later in the article. For the time being, I read the choice to dress Felice in white as a clear, further reference to the character played by Dietrich in *Desire*.

Indeed, it is at the visual level that Paramount's attempt to make Miranda into a Dietrich lookalike becomes even more apparent. If glamour pictures of Miranda and Dietrich are juxtaposed and analysed in terms of hairstyle and make-up, as well as posture and pose, Miranda's physical and typological likeness to Dietrich appears to have been purposefully accentuated. If we compare Figures 1 and 2, for instance, both actresses are characterised by a high forehead adorned with thin, shaped eyebrows <Figure 1, Figure 2>. They both display shoulder-length, wavy blonde hair that is artfully coifed to frame and accentuating their oval shaped faces. In Figure 2 Miranda holds her face with both her long-fingered, impeccably manicured hands, her head slightly leaning back, in a pose reminiscent of Dietrich's in Figure 1. In both figures, chiaroscuro lighting strategically boosts Miranda's and Dietrich's structured facial contours, and especially their prominent cheekbones. The lighting creates

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light and shadow on their faces to accentuate an idea of mysterious distance already conveyed by the enigmatic look in their eyes.

As the manufacture of Miranda's American persona incorporated narrative references to the German-born Dietrich in particular, but also, as we have seen, to the Swedish-born Garbo, the Italian actress became associated with an idealised category of Northern European (hyper)whiteness. Dyer suggests that a sense of belonging to the white race developed in the US in the nineteenth century as part of the process of establishing US identity. This sense of being white played a fundamental role in unifying European settlers across different national cultures against the indigenous Native Americans and the imported African-American. The European settlers, regardless of which European nation they came from, would consider themselves 'white, not red or black' (Dyer 1997, p. 19) like the Native Americans and African-Americans respectively. However, Dyer adds, while whiteness worked very effectively to unify various groups of European settlers, the idea of whiteness as a coalition of different groups also encouraged an idea that some whites were whiter than others. While Anglo-Saxons, Germans and Scandinavians would provide 'the apex of whiteness' (ibid.) under US development, other European groups such as the Irish, Greeks, Poles, Jews and indeed Italians would be assimilated to a lesser or greater extent into the category of normative whiteness under particular historical circumstances.

Therefore, I read Miranda's association with an ideal(ised) category of whiteness represented by Dietrich and Garbo as a reinforcement of white normativity within a conception of an ideal(ised) successful integration of the off-white immigrant within American culture. Such a narrative of successful incorporation would be developed at the

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level of the film texts in which Miranda was located. An attempt to reinforce it would be made extra-textually within the cultural discourses built around Miranda and the films she made in Hollywood, although, as we have already seen, such discourses also contained references, albeit played down, to the actress's struggle to settle in and become part of the Hollywood linguistic and social community. Meanwhile, Miranda's images circulating at the time can be read as serving, whether purposely or not, to 'whiten' her in order to counterbalance, if not erase, her potentially problematic 'not-white-enough' ethnic identity.

### **'We are not calling her Italian': narratives and images of ethnic incorporation in Miranda's American persona<sup>5</sup>**

As already noted, neither of the films Miranda made in Hollywood was set within US national borders. Nevertheless, the film texts within which Miranda was located indirectly played out a romanticised idea of successful integration of European immigrants in American culture. In *Hotel Imperial* the tension between exoticism and domesticity is resolved by locating Polish-born Anna within a narrative of national consolidation and imperial restoration, where the character's class rise is realised through a coupling relationship with an Austrian army officer and is thereby associated with the preservation of a legitimate empire. Likewise, in *Adventure in Diamonds* the traditional menace represented by the transgressive femininity of the ethnic woman, here depicted as a glamorous and charming adventuress, is defused through the positive transformation of Miranda's character, Felice Falcon. Felice starts the film as a jewel thief, but later comes to cooperate with the police in trapping a murderous ring of jewel thieves. I argue that *Adventure in Diamonds* foregrounds an

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ideological vision of the successful containment of ethnic femininity within domesticity, and that this is made possible through the protagonist's romantic coupling with a British captain. While Felice attempts at first to deceive the captain, her good nature is awakened by romantic love: Felice renounces her wicked past, the message here being that the ethnic woman (and her inherently transgressive sexuality) can be positively transformed (in fact, contained and regulated) by man's 'intervention'.

A further reinforcement of discourses around the containment of problematic (ethnic) female sexuality through marriage becomes apparent if consideration is given to the extra-textual promotional materials circulating at the time the film was released. As was customary, in the *Adventure in Diamonds* exhibitor manual reference to various tie-ups was made to boost the film's promotional campaign. One tie-up in particular encouraged exhibitors to contact the local diamond merchants in their community and get them involved in the film's promotion. Among the various aspects of the campaign (which included a diamond exhibit, a fashion show, and so on), particularly interesting is a competition for engaged couples. All engaged couples in the community were invited to post their names in a special box in the theatre lobby; one couple chosen at random would win a diamond engagement ring provided by the theatre and the cooperating jeweller. What I find particularly meaningful, and what supports my point, is that the prize to be awarded was not any piece of diamond jewellery, nor was the competition open to anyone. The prize was an *engagement* ring, and only *engaged* couples could take part. In this light, I therefore see Miranda as mobilised within a narrative that recuperates and incorporates the female ethnic Other within the safe borders of

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sanctioned femininity while emphasising the role marriage can play in terms of such a recuperation.

Another feature that can be read as supportive of assimilationist tendencies in Miranda's American persona is a reference made to Miranda's work ethic and appreciation of beautiful things in one of the biographies Paramount's publicity department circulated in 1939. The biography states that when Miranda was a girl of only 15, she 'discovered a treasure house of beauty' in Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera, the Palace of Fine Arts (Anon 1937). She would spend hours every day among the works of art produced by great painters and sculptors. Such was the fascination those masterpieces exerted on her that almost unconsciously she found herself posing in the positions in which great artists of the past had enshrined their models. The biography goes on to say that as she posed beside her favourite statues, Miranda attracted the attention of a group of young artists, painters and sculptors who were visiting the Pinacoteca. Enchanted by her classical beauty, they asked her to pose for them as their model. This, the biography claims, was Miranda's first step on her way to stardom (Anon 1937):

But it was only a step, and a short one – not a miracle. The rest was work, work, work, and an unswerving purpose. Miranda's love of the beautiful, quite naturally, developed into passionate longing for beauty in her personal possessions – luxurious gowns, rich furs, blazing jewels, exquisite perfumes.

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The biography then provides detailed information about the hard work and dedication Miranda put in in order to better her position and achieve success on screen before she became a well-known star in Italy and Europe and was (later) offered a contract to work in Hollywood. Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that whatever the task at hand was, Miranda would always give her best and would unfailingly obtain brilliant results – whether it was working as a model to finance a course in typing and stenography at an evening school, eventually graduating at the head of her class; or making twelve trips from Milan to Rome over a brief period of time in order to land her first job in cinema as an extra.

Such discourses on the amount of dedication and commitment Miranda showed before she became a popular star should be read alongside the aforementioned accounts of her keenness to master the English language and prepare for her English-speaking roles once in America. These accounts all work together to establish a narrative where Miranda's longing for material possessions, almost 'naturally' inherited from an appreciation of the beauty of priceless works of art, is combined with stories of hard work and full commitment eventually rewarded by well-earned success. I would read this narrative, with its references to myths of meritocracy deeply ingrained in American ideology, as supportive of assimilationist tendencies. In such biographical accounts Miranda emerges as bearing qualities that are welcomed in American culture and are also linked to idea(l)s of good immigrants, who can get the reward of successful assimilation with its connected benefits if they work hard, obey the law and respect American capitalist values. And indeed, Miranda did seem to be supportive of American capitalist values, according to Paramount accounts. That longing for beautiful, material things she had shown at a younger age translated in Hollywood a few

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years later into Miranda’s (albeit indirect) involvement in the promotion of style-conscious mass consumerism. In the Paramount exhibitor manual for *Adventure in Diamonds*, one heading reads ‘Modern Merchandising Sets Fashion Tieup!’ The text gives details (Anon 1940b):

Stores featuring the Hollywood Cinema Fashions should be open for theatre cooperation based on the fact that copies of the three hats and three gowns worn by Isa Miranda in *Adventure in Diamonds* are included in the Hollywood Fashion line. The manufacturers are backing up this promotion by supplying tags, featuring Miss Miranda and carrying picture credits, which are to be attached to the hats and gowns.

Instructions on how to order stills showing Miranda wearing the hats and gowns were included, as well as indications of how to get the list of local retailers handling the Hollywood Cinema Fashions shops, the latter a chain of department store boutiques established in 1930 by Bernard Waldmann for his Cinema Fashions label.

According to Pamela Church-Gibson, ‘it is important to remember that not only has film had a greater influence on fashion than any other form of visual culture, but [...] the very shaping of consumer culture as we know it depends upon the cinema and its unique power to generate both demand and supply’ (2012, p. 55). By the time Miranda arrived in Hollywood, it had become evident that the display of fashionable outfits and accessories in films attracted female patrons. Sarah Berry has pointed out that in the early 1930s, the link between costume designers and retail fashion was seen by the studios as an opportunity to generate good

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publicity. In 1931 *Photoplay* magazine introduced and sponsored Hollywood Fashions, a chain of costume retail franchises. Hollywood Fashions differentiated itself from Waldmann's Cinema Fashions shops by emphasizing the affordability of its outfits (Berry 2000, pp. 16-17, p. 21). As Charles Eckert observes, Cinema Fashions shops were characterised by an aura of exclusivity, only one shop could be opened in each city, and the shops targeted a market of female consumers who could afford to spend at least \$30 for a gown. Competitors such as Hollywood Fashions shops were the answer for those fashion-conscious women with less money to spend on a Hollywood-style outfit (Eckert 2005, p. 34).

As Kapelke-Dale suggests, 'by selling an ephemeral glamour, studios had ended up selling very real, material products, which ended up selling even more of that glamour as women continued to fill the seats of the movie palaces' (2016, p. 93). In this context, according to Gundle (2008, p. 388), glamour can be understood as

a yearning for a better, richer, more exciting and materially lavish lifestyle [that] accompanied the development of modern consumerism and fuelled innumerable fantasies and fictions. [...] Glamour provided the illusion that individual lives could be enhanced and improved by ostensibly magical means. [...] It could also be approached through the practices of consumption, since goods carried ideas and suggestions that were important as their practical uses. The power of transformation lay with anyone or anything that could persuade an audience that they or it possessed it.



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Interestingly, at the same time as accessible outfits inspired by Head's glamorous creations for Miranda in *Adventure in Diamonds* were being made available to less affluent customers in Hollywood Fashions shops, the actress would pose for promotional photographs wearing stylish outfits. Such photographs, which depict her surrounded by symbols of wealth and class advancement (exquisite gowns <Figure 3> and tasteful furniture <Figure 4>), put an emphasis on luxury and conspicuous consumption that fits with the star system of the time and the myth of success in American society. According to the myth of success, anyone in the US, regardless of their race, gender, creed, class or national origin, can achieve wealth and status through hard work, initiative, willingness, perseverance, education and moral uprightness. As Dyer (1998) suggests, stardom can be seen as an articulation of the American Dream, organised around notions of hard work, professionalism, consumption and success.. In this light, stars can be seen as positive models of work and consumption in American culture, where the fabulousness of the stars' lifestyle, which features mansions, swimming pools, tennis courts, parties, limousines, travel, exquisite clothing, and so on, is perceived as the legitimate fruits of one's labour, the well-earned results of stars' hard work to 'get to the top' (Dyer 1998, pp. 3-42). Within this framework, then, if the luxurious lifestyle within which Miranda was framed in Paramount promotional photographs <Figures 3, 4, 5> articulates basic American values, it can also be seen as further reinforcing discourses of the successful integration of immigrants into American (capitalist) ideals.

Indeed, Miranda's promotional photos for Paramount work particularly well to visually convey a notion of ethnic assimilation. Particularly significant in this respect is Figure 3 <Figure 3>. I argue that in this picture – and other, comparable examples – the

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actress's ethnic Otherness appears to have been 'whitened', for Miranda is costumed in white and bathed in light. I see such pictures as working to counterbalance Miranda's potentially problematic ethnic identity while at same time reasserting ideals of white normativity. Dyer argues that 'the photographic media, the apparatus and practice par excellence of a light culture, not only assumes and privileges whiteness, but also constructs it' and that 'idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by it. It streams through them and falls to them from above. In short, they glow' (1997, p. 122). He also observes that the light within or from above seems to spread all over or through the body, and that as a result women glow rather than shine. Shine is light that bounces back from the surface of the skin, and can be regarded as the mirror effect of sweat, which in turn connotes physicality and is therefore at odds with ideals of white femininity. This glow can be enhanced by cosmetics, such as powder, purposely developed to make a woman's face look smooth and dry; by blonde hair, as bloneness is identified with 'heavenly effulgence'; and by white clothing. Dyer emphasises the crucial role played by the photographic media in further enhancing these aspects of cosmetics and apparel through the use of specific conventions of feminine lighting such as haloes, backlighting, soft focus, retouching and gauzes (ibid., p. 124, p. 125).

Drawing on Dyer's observations about how ideals of female whiteness can be constructed through conventions of feminine lighting and attire, I wish to analyse Figure 3 to support my claim about the extent to which Miranda was visually constructed through images that 'whitened' her <Figure 3>. Flatteringly photographed in soft focus, an ideal technique for glamorous portraits in that it reduces harsh lines and connotes a romantic, nostalgic or even dream-like feeling, Miranda stands against a dark background. Illuminated from the

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back, her silhouette, fitted in a clingy, white satin gown with a long chiffon cape, is suitably emphasised. Miranda holds the cape, nonchalantly hanging from her shoulders, with both hands, and as the lighting comes from behind Miranda's body, the thin cape acts as a filter. As a result, the cape becomes almost 'incorporeal', and the halo around Miranda's head conveys an effect of radiance. Miranda's cleavage, as revealed by the very low neckline of the gown she is wearing, and her head, elegantly lifted up, are also lit from above. Again, the final effect for both her skin and her hair is one of glow. If, as Dyer maintains, 'glow remains a key quality in idealised representation of white women' (ibid., p. 132), then I argue that images of Miranda dressed in white, where lighting techniques were adopted that constructed her as being bathed in light, 'whitened' her potentially problematic ethnic Otherness. In so doing, such images contributed, alongside textual and extra-textual cultural discourses circulating around the actress during her Hollywood years, to link Miranda to an ideal(ised) category of normative whiteness.

## **Conclusion**

While I have aimed to provide insights into the role played by Miranda in the politics of ethnic and gender representations in American culture, I am mindful that I have not acknowledged all aspects of American popular culture of the time. The limited compass of this contribution, and the vastness of the subject area, has also meant that there are specific issues that are beyond its scope. My analysis has offered a critical, feminist-inflected exploration of how female Italian ethnicity, as embodied by Miranda, functioned in Hollywood cinema of the late 1930s. A critical consideration of her American has illustrated

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the uses to which her Italian femininity was put during the period. The theoretical context for my argument is that of feminist studies of film and ethnicity, with the initial reference points provided by the work of scholars such as Dyer in *White* (1997) and Negra in *Off-White Hollywood* (2001). Theoretical perspectives on whiteness and ethnicity have been considered alongside the ideological significance and national iconicity of film stars.

In this article, I have discussed the extent to which marketing and publicity inspired by the Hollywood studio system were purposely implemented to shape Miranda's Italian persona at the time of her Italian screen debut in *La Signora di Tutti*. Miranda's Italian image was therefore to some extent already 'Americanised' well before she moved to Hollywood in the late 1930s as Mussolini's Italy was keen to establish a modern and competitive national film industry and star system of its own by replicating the successful Hollywood studio process. I have also identified the impact of Hollywood standards of homogenisation on Miranda's cosmopolitan appeal during her work for Paramount. Miranda was groomed to be visually and discursively associated with contemporary Hollywood star Dietrich who in turn was linked to normative ideals of whiteness. Finally, I have investigated the ways in which Miranda's American star image was constructed in an attempt to establish her as a Dietrich type, Miranda being framed within film narratives that played out (albeit indirectly) an idealised conception of successful American assimilation of European immigrants. At the same time, as has become clear, Miranda was visually constructed through images that effectively 'whitened' her. Miranda's Italianness was sublimated, then, as a result of Hollywood's preference for Northern European stars, a process which, I have suggested, bespoke a need to reassert white normativity in 1930s American society.

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## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## **Notes on contributor**

Antonella Palmieri is senior lecturer in Film, TV and Media at the University of Lincoln. Her research is concerned with the politics of gender, sexual and ethnic representations in Hollywood cinema and American and British Television. She has contributed to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Films* (Routledge 2014) and to *Stars in World Cinema: Screen Icons and Star Systems across Cultures* (I.B. Tauris 2015). Recently, she published ‘Sophia Loren and the healing power of female Italian ethnicity in *Grumpier Old Men*’, in L. Bolten et al., eds. *Lasting Stars: Images that Fade and Personas that Endure* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). Her current project focuses on the construction of Virna Lisi’s star image, anti-feminist narratives and the emergent women’s liberation movement for gender equality in mid-1960s American society.

## **Notes**

[...]

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## **Filmography**

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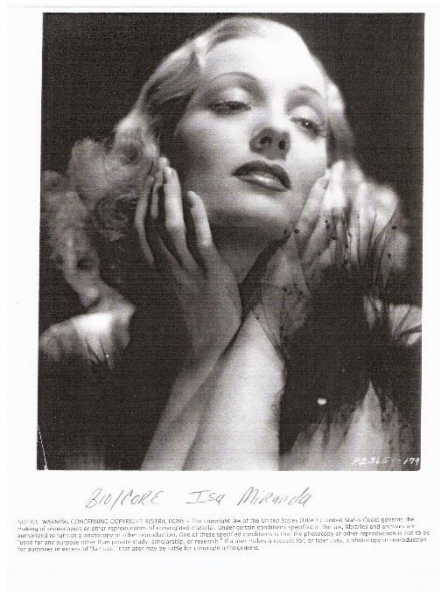
<Figure 1. Promotional still of Marlene Dietrich, photographed by Don English, ca.1932.  
Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles>

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<Figure 2: Paramount Pictures promotional still of Isa Miranda, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles>



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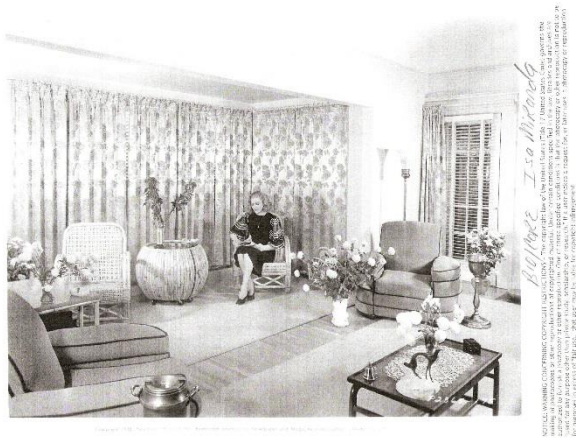
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< Figure 4. Paramount Pictures promotional still of Isa Miranda: the actress in her Hollywood home, enjoying some rest after a long day at work. The original caption reads: 'The living room of Isa Miranda's Hollywood home is furnished simply but luxuriously', Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles>



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<sup>1</sup> Press release, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous clipping in Miranda's clipping files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>3</sup> Paramount presented Miranda as the candidate for the studio's 'Queen of It' – 'It' being code for allure, sex appeal, beauty and glamour. As it emerged from a biography of the Italian actress circulating in late December 1938, since the time of Clara Bow, a previous Queen of It, It had been more or less absent from the screen, and only recently had new It girls begun to appear. While Universal presented French Danielle Darrieux, and Warner Brothers matched her with the American Priscilla Lane, MGM came forth with Austrian Hedy LaMarr. However, Paramount insisted that the Studio's Queen of It had yet to be seen, and that the Paramount candidate was Miranda, 'the blonde sensation from the Continental stage and screen' (Anon 1937).

<sup>4</sup> This comment can be found in Botsford 1939.

<sup>5</sup> This comment can be found in Botsford 1939.